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ABSTRACT

Despite unfounded claims that scientific approaches to educational administration are irrelevant, research continues to clarify the nature of administration in practical ways. The author of this essay, a participant in the Cooperative Program in Educational Administration (CPEA) in the 1950's, first critiques Thomas B. Greenfield's 1981 paper, "Can Science Guide the Administrator's Hand?". Greenfield's implication that CPEA was an idealistic program designed to train administrators to approach their tasks as behavioral scientists is completely rejected by the author. He asserts to the contrary that behavioral science research methods provide insight into actual practice, permitting administrators to undertake efforts at improvement on a firmly pragmatic footing. The author then presents his observations on the practical effects resulting from the application of behavioral science research findings to three aspects of school administration: equity in educational finance, the internal dynamics of school boards, and the characteristics of superintendents. The author notes that research leads not only to changes in practice and new conceptions of administration but to new questions for further research. (PGD)

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ADMINISTRATIVE THEORY: CURRENT ISSUES IN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

by

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Those who make history and survive long enough to see it written are often bemused, and sometimes offended by what is recorded. Those of us involved in the Cooperative Program in Educational Administration in the 1950's are no exception.

CPEA was a complex mixture of professors and advanced graduate students interacting in the traditional segments of university life cutting across teaching, research, and service, and often the roles were interchangeable: professors conducting research with the aid of students, and vice versa; students teaching in their areas of expertise, as well as professors teaching; and services rendered by teams of professors and students working together on problems in the field, with leadership roles in these teams varying on the basis of expertise.

It was out of this background that I read with considerable puzzlement the paper presented last year by Thomas B. Greenfield, entitled "Can Science Guide the Administrator's Hand?" which appears to have been the proximate cause for this session. Professor Greenfield's answer was no, which he took quite a while to say and left one wondering why he asked the question. He conceded that his conclusions were cast in less cautious terms than usual, without commenting on some errors in the assumptions on which those conclusions were based. Examining these errors turned out to be more interesting than trying to follow his argument.

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First, let us consider his erroneous assumption that those of us who came into the CPEA programs in the 1950's were there to be trained as school administrators. Not so. We were there as advanced graduate students. The entry degree for school administrators in the United States and Canada was then as it is still today, the master's degree. We were, in fact, very good administrators when we entered the program for one of the more important criteria for selection to these programs and eligibility for the substantial fellowships accompanying that selection was outstanding performance in an administrative role.

Nor were we "shocked and offended," as Professor Greenfield charged, by professors telling us that theory-based research would make our knowledge of our profession absolute. No professor, to my knowledge, ever made that statement, and we wouldn't have believed it if anyone had made it. On the contrary, we who came into the program as wary pragmatists found our professors quite critical of the scientific management period of the 1920's, and quite skeptical about the possibility of a science of education, let alone a science of educational administration.

Furthermore, when Professor Greenfield said the "New Movement" aimed at bringing social science in all its complexity into administrative practice, he seems to have misread or misinterpreted what Halpin said. What Halpin said, and I quote directly: "The new movement in administration: the use of theory in administration, the stress upon the contribution of the behavioral sciences to administration, and a plea for theoretically oriented research."[1]

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[1]Andrew W. Halpin, "A Foggy View from Olympus," The Journal of Educational Administration, VII, pp. 3-18 (May 1969).

What we did find in CPEA, and what most of us were consciously seeking, was a way to improve our understanding of what we had been doing as administrators. We were not looking for Utopias; rather, we were inclined to think things could be improved, and that, as people came to know more about what they were doing, they ought to be able to do it better. As we began to learn more about concepts and models drawn broadly from the social and behavioral sciences we were impressed with the way reality could be represented in ways that permit generalizations about our past and prospective experiences and provide new insights into the way we and the complex organizations we managed interact. Where we found these concepts and models useful we internalized them, and when the time came for us to do our dissertations, we applied, and, on occasion, even improved upon some of them. A few of us managed to make modest but useful additions at the margins to the knowledge about the processes with which we dealt. None of us came away imbued with the notion that we had been transformed into scientific administrators, for most of us would have seen such a formulation as a conflict in terms. Rather we came away still knowing we were very good administrators but with some useful new tools for analyzing problems, more knowledgeable about both human and organizational behaviors, and somewhat better equipped to discuss the means and ends of administration in educational enterprises in terms that were understandable by both scholars and practitioners in this field.

These preliminary comments out of the way, I will now make a few observations on three lines of inquiry in school administration that interested us then, note some improvement in their illumination as behavioral science theory developed, and show some changes in the kinds of questions that were

asked as understanding increased. I will begin with the field I know best, the financing of the educational enterprise.

The classic study in this field was done by Ellwood P. Cubberley at Teachers College in 1905. He noted that the benefits of education, and the burdens of the taxes that supported schooling varied greatly among school districts and among states. He believed that children should have substantially equal resources available for their education, and that the tax burdens resulting should be equitably distributed. This concept undergirded one line of persistent inquiry through the first half of this century, most of it aimed at providing legislative remedies for inequalities in these benefits and burdens. This aim was changed by a carefully reasoned dissertation at the University of Chicago by Arthur Wise and subsequently published as Rich Schools Poor Schools; he reformulated questions about inequality in ways that suggested a judicial remedy. Subsequently, the Serrano case in California defined such a remedy, and almost half the states have by now been directed by the courts to change their systems for financing elementary and secondary schooling. An idealist can ask, "Is the problem of inequality solved?" A pragmatist answers, no, of course not, nor is it ever likely to be, for no important human problem is ever likely to be completely solved. But the research that was done and indeed continues apace has suggested useful intermediate questions, and as we pursue these questions we improve our understanding of the problem, we have increased our tools for analysis, and we have increased the number of well-trained people able to formulate and pursue new questions; and furthermore the work has contributed to some amelioration of many of the old inequalities.

There were other sources of change in school finance research in the 1950's, and I will mention four. First, more economists and political scientists

became interested in the subject. They brought new terms, new concepts, and new tools of analysis to the field of study which had grown quite traditional and quite encrusted with terminology not readily translatable into the language of disciplined inquiry. Second, the Civil Rights Movement added new dimensions to the concerns for equality. Third, concerns for efficiency as formulated by engineers and scientific management experts in the 1920's have found quite different expressions as reformulated more recently into such deceptively simple but quite profound questions as: How much time do children actually spend on the substance of schooling? And how might the time spent vary for effective learning with children who learn at different rates? And fourth, notions of the human capital created as a result of investment in schooling emerged in the 1950's and deepened in significance as new questions were formulated about how much of what we spend for schooling purchases a consumer good, and how much is actually creating increments of human capital. A penetrating question now being formulated: After a quarter of a century of rapidly increasing expenditures for schooling, why is productivity declining? It's probably an important question, but it didn't and perhaps couldn't have occurred to us in the beginning, or the middle of this century, since we now have a clearer understanding of why the costs of schooling tend to rise across all economies and over all time because they are so heavily weighted to personal services.

School board studies were another set of inquiries quite popular in the literature of school administration. Prior to the 1950's they were largely descriptive. Analytical studies deepened in significance as concepts out of psychology and the study of group dynamics were brought to bear. A particularly

powerful notion that helped many of us be more analytical was presented in a short movie Herb Thelen developed called "Invisible Committees." It showed a board and superintendent at work and as each issue was debated, an inset showed over each speaker's head, representing friends and neighbors arguing about that issue. It left a permanent impression, an eidetic image that flashes each time I puzzle over a board member's behavior, and offers me quick entry to an analytical approach that deals, not with ascribing motives, but rather with estimating the strength of the coalition in that "invisible committee" that prompted the behavior.

Infusions from political science and such concepts as conflict management, power structures, and influence systems also affected school board studies in the 1950's and sixties. As teaching became the most highly unionized segment of the labor force, and the broad consensus which was for so long totally supportive of public education has broken down, conflict management has become the major function of school administrators, and the scholarship available in labor economics became relevant.

The final observation I will make is on studies of superintendents. Again, studies of the superintendent earlier in this century were also largely descriptive. We were much taken with role theory in the 1950's. The notion of separating the concept of a superintendent from the concept of the superintendency struck us as highly useful. It led to much more penetrating studies of superintendents and the superintendency. It began to break down the view that a properly prepared administrator is a properly shaped peg that could be dropped into any properly labeled hole. It has led also to wide use

by boards of professional search committees, and they in turn have learned that they must look not only at the qualifications of candidates but they must also inquire much more deeply into the set of expectations that defines the role of the superintendent in that community.

In 1971 Vern Cunningham[2] published an historical sequence of generalized images of the superintendent, seemingly held by those who trained administrators in the past. Cubberley at Stanford early in this century seems to have postulated sort of a kindly philosopher king; Strayer at Teachers College, a technician; Ernest Melby, the democratic administrator; and Cunningham's interpretation of the most recent image, his own perhaps, is the applied social scientist. In 1981, I posited the conflict manager.[3] I have no difficulty visualizing any of these images for I have known those who fit nicely into each. None of them functioned without considering "if I do this, that will follow," and that is as good a definition of theorizing as any I know. I would also venture a guess that one's ability to theorize about any topic would improve as one's relevant knowledge increased.

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[2]Luvern N. Cunningham, Governing Schools: New Approaches to Old Issues, Merrill Educational Administration Series (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1971).

[3]H. Thomas James, "Educational Administration and Organization: A 40-Year Perspective," Educational Researcher, Vol. 11, No. 2, February 1982, pp. 14-17.